
UNWELCOME MATS: A DECOLONIAL INTERVENTION, CHALLENGING THE REFUGEE WELCOME-NARRATIVE

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Discourse surrounding the ‘refugee issue’, particularly within self-declared left-leaning, liberal movements, has often centred on the rhetoric of welcome. The narrative however has been adopted, reproduced and circulated without critically interrogating the framing by which such welcome is called upon. This article argues, rather than being inclusionary, the idea of welcome within the Australian context is in fact an exclusionary practice. Welcome as an extension of border imperialism. It explores the inherent paradoxes, assumptions and colonial undercurrents through a public intervention, Unwelcome Mats, commissioned as part of Melbourne Fringe Festival. Unwelcome Mats was an intervention that saw a series of welcome mats printed with the word ‘unwelcome’ and placed at buildings where the act of welcoming is and has been a point of contention, including the Immigration Museum, Old Parliament house and the Department of Citizenship and Border Protection. Unwelcome Mats, instead of a one-dimensional welcome, sought to instead ask: who has the imperial, historical power to welcome?

Keywords: decolonial, refugee, public intervention

1. Introduction

“Irony is a colonialist power structure defining what legal immigration is”
Bree Newsome¹

Discourse surrounding the ‘refugee issue’, particularly within self-declared left-leaning, liberal movements, has often centred on the rhetoric of welcome. The narrative however has been adopted, reproduced and circulated without critically interrogating the framing by which such welcome is called upon. This article argues, rather than being inclusionary, the idea of

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¹ <https://www.facebook.com/AFROPUNK/?fref=ts>

welcome within the Australian context is in fact an exclusionary practice. Welcome, as an empowered nationalist practice, asserting a spatial power of the group that has the imperial power to do the welcoming. Exercising, maintaining, validating and enforcing the welcomer's position of power to do so in the first place. The receiver of the welcome is not only made present through this dynamic, but *positioned*. The welcomee as awaiting welcome in a manner that frames them as passive, apolitical and without agency.

The welcome-narrative sits within these limits, incapable of actively decentring the welcomer nor challenge the relational frames. Furthermore, in failing to critic the historical origins that created the contemporary conditions of welcomer-welcomee dynamics, 'welcome' situates discourse within colonial understandings of sovereignty, identity and humanity. It treats borders as fixed and universal, rather than a process of invasion, invention and extension of western modernity. Entrenching identity within sedimentary, imperial notions. Restricting border definitions to the geo-spatial rather than one of a myriad of "practices, institutions, discourse and systems" (Walia, 2013, p.5) of oppressive, ongoing border imperialisms. The welcome-narrative through the specific subject-positions of welcomer and welcome, as a legitimization of settler logic and thus manifestation of border imperialism, which in turn has serious and tangible implications in how we conceptualise, discuss and undertake refugee advocacy.

This article therefore does not seek to get caught up in the binary 'for' or 'against' arguments of intake, numbers and demographics, instead seeking to analyse the discourse frames within which the conversations take place. In order to highlight the power differentials, inherent paradoxes and colonial undercurrent of the welcome-narrative, I refer to a public intervention piece, Unwelcome Mats, commissioned as part of Melbourne Fringe Festival. The article tracks how Unwelcome Mats sought to situate discourse away from the geo-spatial, ahistorical, towards the epistemic – in order to explore the assumptions of universality and natural order. Unwelcome Mats as an intervention that interrogated and unsettled the colonial underpinnings of the narrative. This article unpacks the intervention in order to understand the limits of the welcome discourse.

2. Problematizing the Welcome-Narrative

Welcome is the discursive anchor for the majority of refugee related rhetoric and public imagery, from banners displayed on church steeples in Melbourne's central business district (see Figure 1) to the marketing collateral for nationwide protests (see Figure 2). It comes with its own dramaturgy of performance, rules for legitimacy, characters and semiotics, which is why I have called it a narrative – to outline its singular origin story and construction (Wynter, 2015). In referring to it as a narrative, I wish to highlight its reliance on a mono-hegemonic-colonial telling of history. Therefore as a narrative that reproduces colonial ideas of border and nation-state identities and terms of enunciation that lack reflexive criticality. It implies within its very framing an empowered spatiality, in which those that welcome set the limits of discourse (Hage, 2000, p. 89). The welcome-narrative applied by both 'pro' and 'anti' movements, I argue, sits within terms of enunciation that only serve to appease the welcomers own power and consciousness.

Often set in the framework of welcoming someone to one's home, the narrative revolves around individualised, singular and neoliberal conceptualisations of the welcoming act. In 2012 I

was involved in a project called Couch World, a pop-up, outdoor, living art display that emulated the idea of a ‘living room’². The project used the metaphor of couches to speak about human rights in regards to Australian multiculturalism. Thus ‘welcome’ was linked to the act of welcoming others into one’s individual homes, conjuring up installations associated to one’s private lounge room: couches, rugs and beanbags. Welcoming was thus framed as the individual’s responsibility and actions that make the other feel at ‘home’-isolated in the particular moment by which the practice of ‘welcoming’ takes place, the space between public and private. The idea of welcome associated to the singular, private, present, specifically outlined idea of home attached to a geographical location, material house and with this a sense of specific ownership and entitlement. The welcoming is done on the welcomer’s terms, through their imperially bestowed privilege to welcome – a moment in which definitive power subject positions are exercised. Ghassan Hage (2000) speaks of the dangers of setting scenes in a ‘home’ situation, arguing, “Underlying this homeliness is a fantasy of a national order based on a clearly positioned otherness” (Hage, 2000, p. 98). Setting such scenes within a neoliberal, materialistic, geographical idea of home, propels discursive reductionism. The narrative constructs the welcome moment as a singular, equal, human-to-human encounter that relies solely on individualised responsibility and behaviour, avoiding structural considerations. It conveniently negates the complexities, reducing historical, political and socially created dynamics into two-dimensional characteristics: there sits the welcomer, with their imperial power to welcome and need to relieve singular notions of guilt, and the welcomee, stuck in notions of victimhood and seeking tolerance from the welcomer.

The welcoming is done on the welcomers terms, owner versus guest – a guest that is made to feel at home only so much as the welcomer makes the guest feel so. The guest may feel the ramifications of such gestures, however the same awareness also reinforces that, as a guest does not possess the same power to welcome. One may be made to ‘feel’ at home, but one’s behaviour and way of being adjusts to this temporal state of welcome by which the boundaries are made clear. The welcome-narrative, when associated to such ideas of home, makes up only a small aspect of the contextual and structural understandings surrounding the act of welcoming, considerations that a majority of welcome-narratives negate. Despite the welcome-narrative being displayed in public spaces and applied to community organising, it recreates the same definitive relationship between the person with the power to welcome someone into their space and the guest that is welcomed into a space that is, by relational definition, not their own – a moment one person has the power to create but also the power to revoke. One may ‘feel’ at home and yet not *be* at home, as explained by Jeffers (2012). In basing discourse within individualised notions of humanity it decontextualizes subject positions, which allows the narrative to rest on a false sense of neutrality, gratitude and humanitarianism. The irony in nation-state conversational frame, as described in *Rethinking Refugee: Beyond States of Emergency*, Nyers (2006) is that “in the creation of the citizen, we created the other”. The welcome-narrative thus, actively distinguishes *through* discourse “between inside and an outside, between the citizens, nations and communities (p. xi)”. As a result of the binary logic of colonial sovereignty, the welcome narrative draws from western values in defining humanity and in the call for exercising welcome. The narrative, drawing from and working within the presumptive, hegemonic binary sovereignty logic (Nyers, 2006). A binary that frames, fixes and enforces a dynamic of power, political

² <http://www.multiculturalarts.com.au/events2012/couch.shtml>

spatiality and conditions of possibility (Nyers, 2006). This in turn feeds hegemonic conceptions of refugeeness in which ontologies and dignity are tied to mechanisms of border imperialism (e.g., citizenship, passports). Or as I argue, the welcome-narrative *as* border imperialism.

As described by Eve Tuck's *Letter to Communities* (2009, p. 19), the "after-effects and the colonizing are inextricably linked". Any discourse around welcome, and refugee, asylum seeker and ex-detainee communities that fails to acknowledge this, only recreates a "safe performance of political relation" (Nyers, 2006, p. xi) or what I term the dramaturgy of the welcome-narrative. Looked upon as a type of performance, the welcome-narrative demands a specific aesthetic, characters and semiotics. This, in order to frame the welcomee as deserving of the bestowing of welcome, that only the welcomer has the power to grant. Thus placing the demands on palatable identities, "caged within a depoliticized humanitarian space" (Nyers, 2006, p. xii), the receiver must seem innocent and non-political – which is often why children are used in the welcome narrative aesthetic. The demand is on two archetypal characters within the welcomer and welcomee dynamic: that of citizen versus non-citizen, humanitarian versus the victim in need of receiving humanitarianism. The aesthetic requires traumatised characters in order to garner sympathy from the audience (Jeffers, 2012) emotion and charity. It references refugee, asylum seekers and ex-detainees but only from the socio-political margins (Tuck, 2009). The victimization demanded by the welcome narrative must be performed, paraded to perform credibility: as human beings, as refugees worthy of welcome. The welcome-narrative irons out complexities, for simple, manageable and consumerable characters, for the welcomer. As Ien Ang in 'Is refugee art possible' (Rotas, 2014, p. 54) warns, "drawing lines around people" though such character prescriptions, equals a form of discursive reductionism. It also fails to highlight how Australia and sites of representation, interpretation and power continue to be a contested space. Without the context of colonisation and colonial definitions, we are therefore left with vulnerable, damage-centered, pathologising analysis (Tuck, 2009).



Figure 1. In the heart of Melbourne's central business district there is a 'Let's fully welcome refugees' banner that sits on one of St. Pauls Cathedral's steeples



Figure 2. Social media banner of nationwide protests

Through the negation of historical forces, false notions of neutrality and singular constructs of welcoming, the narrative not only reproduces colonial violence, it substantially undermines critical discourse. As Nyers (2006, p. 31) suggests, when we reject the assumptions of impartiality within such discourse, we are suddenly “offered new insights into the paradoxes and limits of contemporary humanitarian action”. Therefore in order to understand the current conditions, one must first and foremost acknowledge the “consciously and historically produced by and through the systems of colonization: a multidimensional force underwritten by western Christianity defined by White supremacy, and fuelled by global capitalism” (Tuck, 2009, p. 19). Unwelcome Mats was an action that attempted to highlight the false claims of ahistoricism, challenge the central points of power and shift modalities of representation. In attempting to trace the colonial history of the welcome-narrative, through the institutional rather than the presentation of individualised narratives of refugees and asylum seekers, it counteracted ideas of vulnerability and victimization. It sought to shift the colonial gaze and challenge the palatable consumption of refugee, asylum seeker and ex-detainee by white audiences.

3. Unwelcome Mats

Unwelcome Mats was one of 18 public art works as part of Melbourne Fringe Festival’s keynote project Uncommon Places, which commissioned artists to create art across four distinct geographical areas around Melbourne. Unwelcome Mats was an intervention that saw a series of welcome mats printed with the word ‘unwelcome’ and placed at buildings where the act of welcoming is and has been a point of contention, including the Immigration Museum, Old Parliament House and the Department of Citizenship and Border Protection. Typically, a welcome mat when placed outside of one’s home, elicits images of polite and friendly greetings. However, by juxtaposing a welcome mat with an unwelcome phrase and strategic placement, the intervention raised questions about ownership of national space and the structural mechanisms that determine social positionality of bodies within this discourse.

ARTIST STATEMENT: *Unwelcome Mats* is a commentary on our increasing protectionism of a singular mono-cultural ideal; of colonial fantasies, militaristic paranoia around ‘border control’, our historical amnesia, our toxic discourse, our dehumanizing policies and ongoing violation of refugee rights. It highlights the contradictions between our anthem and actions, and the paradox of our sense of

national ownership on a land never ceded³.

Unwelcome Mats consciously challenged the one dimensional welcome-narrative that calls upon our sense of individualised humanity. Its juxtaposition, from phrasing to placement, was key in highlighting the contradictions of modernity/coloniality⁴ thus differing from other welcoming movements because it calls to question the colonial power differentials inherent in the discursive frameworks related to welcome and welcoming. An intervention that highlighted the need to delink from universalistic colonial constructs. The Unwelcome Mats, through public intervention, challenged the idea of welcome as a private act. Furthermore, in placing the mats at federal sites (see Figures 3, 4 and 5), it called to question the notion of welcome is an individual responsibility, highlighting the colonial sites that created our contemporary understandings of borders, nation-states and identity.



Figure 3. Unwelcome Mat at the Melbourne Immigration Museum, at the entrance of the permanent exhibition 'Getting In'

In critiquing the welcome-narrative I am not questioning welcoming per se rather, the foundations, which legitimize one group's act of welcoming over another. In centralising the welcomer as the knowing subject, the classifier, the enunciator, the welcome-narrative reproduces imperial power-dynamics by employing modernity rhetoric, whilst actively negating its colonial undercurrent. The advocacy of the welcome-narrative, I argue, does not critically challenge relations of power and structure. It is the difference between a phrase such as "refugees support our way of life", a sign pasted on the wall of my liberally inclined university cafeteria, and "not a refugee 'crisis', it is a crisis of state and hyper militarisation for which the abused are

³ <http://uncommonplaces.melbournefringe.com.au/2015/09/02/tania-canas-unwelcome-mats/>

⁴ "Modern and colonial are simultaneous phenomena in time and space...coloniality is not seen as a constitutive phenomenon but rather a derivative of modernity" (Castro-Gomez, 2007, p. 433). As two concepts inherently related though often not both acknowledged in the same manner (Vázquez, 2014).

blamed”, as published through RISE Refugee’s⁵ social media.



Figure 4. Unwelcome Mat at the entrance of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection



Figure 5: Unwelcome Mat at the Parliament House, Melbourne

⁵ An Australian asylum seeker, refugee and ex-detainee advocacy organisation run and controlled entirely by the refugee and asylum seeker community.

In the first phrase, the enunciator speaks, in the second the enunciated does. In the later statement, the terms of enunciation are shifted, as it begins the conversation differently, namely outside of the ‘good’, ‘assimilated’ or ‘contributing’ refugee that answer only to the terms set by colonial Australia. This article argues that the majority of refugee advocacy, including the welcome-narrative, exists as enunciator exercising its power to enunciate ‘other’. With the relations of power remaining the same, with the power to position others in the management of national space, occurs from those who feel entitled to do so (Hage, 2000).

4. Unwelcome Mats as Decolonial Intervention?

Unwelcome Mats challenges the central point of power by highlighting the complexities through multi-juxtaposition. Through this, asking who occupies the central point of discursive frames and thus universalistic claims? What I mean by that is it makes visible the seemingly invisible, omnipresent yet all-encompassing origin-point of gaze by which all else falls in relation. As argued by Mignolo (2011) challenging the terms of the conversation is in itself an epistemic act of disobedience and thus a decolonial intervention. Late last year, Australia’s largest asylum seeker organisation, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), posted pictures of welcome mats with the printed phrase “#refugeeswelcome”⁶ this was brought to my attention after the Unwelcome Mats intervention and thus my piece was not a direct response to the ASRC mats. Unwelcome Mats offered an alternative reading to the welcome-narrative by questioning the colonial power differentials related to welcoming – the very premise of welcome. Unwelcome Mats differed from something like the ASRC mats, as it is not a blanket one-dimensional welcome that calls upon our sense of individualised humanity. Its juxtaposition was key in highlighting the contradictions of modernity/coloniality – welcome mat and unwelcome phrase, context and placement in institutions pushes beyond one-dimensional welcome narrative – a way to question the discursive and problematic frame, which in term makes the difference between for/with, helping versus self-determining, reinforcing versus challenging. Thus Unwelcome Mats refused to build on the aesthetics which gives the illusion of egalitarianism. It challenged the singular, rigid, notions related to welcoming and home. Unwelcome Mats used juxtaposition and deliberate public intervention to highlight the inherent paradoxes, absurdities and thus very construction of narrative. Furthermore, Unwelcome Mats was an initiative of a member of the refugee community and thus a direct challenge to the welcome-narrative power-dynamic.

5. Re-framing Borders as Inventions and Extensions of Border Imperialism

“Border imperialism as an extension and externalization of the universalization of western formations beyond its own boundaries through settler colonialism and military occupation.

⁶<https://www.facebook.com/Asylum.Seeker.Resource.Centre.ASRC/photos/a.341915052513314.75244.341910905847062/964568980247915/?type=3>

Border imperialism as an extension of global empire that maintains unequal relations of political, economic, cultural and social dominance of the west over its colonies”
(Walia, 2013, p. 40)

In another public intervention, which drew from the welcome discourse, an Adelaide artist raised \$8000 through a possible campaign to travel around Australia putting up posters that read ‘Real Australians Say Welcome’. The artist’s aim was to encourage a rethinking of refugee and asylum seekers by playing on the second lyric of the Australian anthem, “for those who’ve come across the seas/we’ve boundless plains to share/with courage let us all combine/to advance Australia fair”. The ‘Real Australians say welcome’ project only strengthens colonial ideals rather than challenges. It draws its authority by exercising a certain group’s imperial power to welcome, that was given by a structural mechanism that negates indigenous sovereignty (e.g., Citizenship). Australian Indigenous elder Robbie Thorpe, as quoted in *Undoing Border Imperialism*, states “the Australian government has no legitimate right to grant or refuse entry to anyone in this country, let alone lock up people fleeing war and persecution” (Walia, 2013, p. 37). Unwelcome Mats challenged the notion of identity as sedimentary, Australia as a people and land grouped (Mignolo, 2011). Instead it reframes borders as “lines demarcating territory” (Walia, 2013, p. 6), constructs, non-universal, imagined yet enforced. Such reframing is essential in interrogating the “networks of governance that determines how bodies will be included within the nation state, and how territory will be controlled within and in conjunction with the dictates of global empire and transnational capitalism” (Walia, 2013, p. 6).

Thus I argue that in claiming that all Australians say welcome, it builds on the colonial construct of what it is and means to be Australian – a definition which could only come into being through genocide of indigenous peoples and maintained through structural violence. The mainstream narrative of Australia, as we know it today, was not one of discovery but invention. The idea of Australia was invented in 1788 from so-called *terra nullius*, solidified in 1901 through Federation and forged through the process of European colonialism and expansion of the Western worldview. One doesn’t need to look far to see how such perceptions are managed, than by looking at the Minister of Immigration’s portfolio name changes: The Citizenship and Border Protection folio was formally known as The Immigration and Citizenship Portfolio (2007-13) and before that as The Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Portfolio. Border imperialism is thus the result of settler logic, a socio-historically constructed justification to support a singular dominant narrative. The settler logic becomes an adopted logic by systematically excluding other knowledge’s and narratives (Mignolo, 2011). Historically, colonialism has been about cartographic expansion but is now about cartographic exclusion, with border protectionism as an ongoing colonial existential violence. Even the recent discussions about retracting Australian citizenship from dual citizens is a manifestation of this managed idea of ‘Australia’ and thus ‘Australians’. It essentially creates perceived values of core and periphery Australian identities, and thus who asserts the right to do any form of welcoming (if at all). Through juxtaposition, Unwelcome Mats attempts to delink these concepts and highlight their pervasive, omnipresent, claims to neutrality. Unlike the “Real Australians Say Welcome” intervention, Unwelcome Mats sought to highlight the daily manifestations of systemic colonialism. It raised questions around where does a space starts and where does it end? In so doing, making a commentary of geographical locations and divisions of countries as imperial constructions of the past five hundred years. It attempted to delink the idea of Australia from the cartographic image we associate to the notion.

Placing the mats at colonial sites, rather than obvious geo-spatial borders themselves, is a refusal to treat borders as fixed and universal. Instead, by doing so, it sought to ask questions around who has the imperial, historical power to welcome and why. Framing welcoming as an epistemic issue not just geographical – borders as inventions and extensions of western modernity. Situating welcome as border imperialism – as ideological and systemic totalising monopoly of categorising reality and prescribing ontological ways of inhabiting the world. Before colonisation, Indigenous Australians did not conceptualise themselves as ‘Indigenous Australians’ – the notion was invented with the expanding existence of the West and its perverse need to differentiate, define and dichotomise the world. The creation of ‘nation states’ led to the creation of imperial national identities which became a way to value/(de)value, humanise/(de)humanise. It was another way to manage, measure, justify and defend the ‘idea’ of a nation and thus identify ‘aliens’ and ‘foreigners’. Borders and thus inclusion/exclusion dynamics were created through colonialism and the development of the modern world order. This narrative is then reproduced and reinforced by social structures which support the rhetoric of its normalisation. Unwelcome Mats was an attempt to challenge this normativity. When covered by online Australian cultural media outlet, Junkee, one of the responses to the Unwelcome Mats was “tell the artist that the old parliament has no say in who is /isn’t allowed in the country.” This is precisely the point Unwelcome Mats attempted to highlight and challenge, one cannot speak about borders without talking about the colonial constructs (i.e., the representations) vestiges of colonialism. As argued by decolonial theorist, Rolando Vazquez, our contemporary understanding of borders and modernity cannot exist without coloniality. “Modernity always appears with the colonial face” (Vázquez, 2014, p. 174) In placing the Unwelcome Mats at significant sites that represent Australia’s colonial, cartographic and demographic control, we can begin to track the intentional, historical moulding of our national dominant narrative through various manifestations of institutionalised instructions. In so doing, the mats question what narratives are dehumanised and silenced through systemic exclusion.

6. Refusal of Personal Narratives

“The problem with individualism is rooted in its insistence on seeing as an individual characteristics that which oftentimes is not found except within the collectively, or in attributing to individuality the things produced only in the dialectic of interpersonal relations. Through this, individualism ends up reinforcing the existing structures, because it ignores the reality of social structures and reduces all structural problems to personal problems”
(Martin-Baro, 1994, p.22).

Unwelcome Mats made it a point to refuse to ascribe to the dramaturgy of the welcome-narrative, aesthetics of victimization, pain and passivity. I argue that the welcome-narrative in attempting to humanise refugees and asylum seekers, does so through western conceptualisations of humanity based on individualism, thus paradoxically dehumanises by decontextualizing. The further trap that the individualised welcome-narrative falls into is the paradox of calling upon the entitled humanity of the welcomer whilst using the same humanistic premise to position itself as neutral discursive frame. The welcome-narrative becomes about how the welcomer convinces themselves and thus others of the welcomee’s humanity. It is in this convincing that the

welcome-narrative particularly conceals colonial rhetoric under the paradoxical assumption that if one argues enough, the welcomee will be given the same privileges within the system that created the structural violence to begin with. When speaking about true dialogue, anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko used the analogy of being invited to tea in order to highlight how discursive frames and thus ontologies are reproduced (1978). He argues that such an invitation sets up artificial integration as it happens within the terms and under the conduct of the politically privileged. When the welcomee is reduced to arguing their humanity, credibility and thus existence; they do so to the gaze, satisfaction and approval of the welcomer. Mignolo (2011) describes this dynamic as a colonially constructed difference between *humanitas* (or welcomer) and *anthropos* (welcomee) (see Figure 6), created through historical imperialism that grouped people to land, dividing the world into nations that informs our understanding of borders and thus such subject positions (Mignolo, 2011, p. 85). *Humanitas* defines the discursive frames, through hegemonic privilege, *anthropos* on the other hand, occupy the position of ‘other’ through colonial difference,

Illegal immigrants and homosexuals are today within the realm of the *anthropos*. The domain of *humanitas* is con-substantial with the management of knowledge of global linear thinking – the lines have been traced from the perspective of *humanitas*, and it is in the *humanitas* where the control of knowledge resides (Mignolo, 2011, p. 85).

Humanitas or welcomer, therefore has a privileged humanity within the nation-state, “a real human being as defined by the imperial colonial idea of what it means to be human” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 127), linking humanity to the already encoded by imperial discourse. “Lack of humanity is placed in imperial actors, institutions and knowledge’s that had the arrogance of deciding that certain people they did not like were less human” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 14). Sylvia Wynter (2015) in *On Being Human as Praxis* also tracks our present analytic categories (race, class, gender, sexuality, margins and centres, insides and outside) as having a colonial history. A history that is selective in telling only a partial story, whilst making claims to universalism. Humanness, she argues, continues to be understood in hierarchal terms (2005).

SOCIOGENETIC	
<i>“How you conceive your own identity once you realize that your identity depends on your awareness of how you are perceived by others” (Mignolo, 2013)</i>	
Welcomer	Welcomee
Humanitas	Anthropos
Enunciator	Enunciated
Oppressor	Oppressed
Dominant	Subjugated
Inventor	Invented
Classifier	Classified

Figure 6. Welcomer-welcomee dynamics as sociogenetic characters

Since colonisation, humanity was brought into the same field of representation, into a single field of power (Wynter, 2015), however it didn’t bring us all equally – thus creating modalities of humanity. Unwelcome Mats looked to disrupt the epistemology of the singular origin

narrative by throwing paradoxes together, highlighting other narratives and disrupting. It hoped to bring back discourse to representation, as the “central mechanism in the process of colonization” (Grosfoguel, 2008 p. 189).

In other words, to be considered a true human being in direct ratio with the imperial/colonial idea of what it means to be human (Mignolo, 2009). Individualistic argument positions the individual as “an entity with its own meaning... attributing social patterns to individual circumstance created by individual patterns... ignores the reality of social structures and reduces all structural problems to personal problem” (Martin-Baro, 1994, p. 22), presenting the individual humanity as “bereft of history, community, political commitment and social loyalties” (Martin-Baro, 1994, p. 5). The humanity argument can thus become a guise to dismiss politicised ontology and social inequality. Unwelcome Mats shifted from the personal story in order taking away the power of welcomer and the traps of humanitarianism arguments, in order to reframe in regards to social and institutional determinants. It shifted gaze, through aesthetic juxtaposition, to highlight the paradox of the discursive frames themselves.

7. Challenging the Central Point of Power

The privilege of inventing classification, centralising oneself and relations, centralises a domain group into an ethereal place of knowledge-making, tied to the geo-political, something Santiago Castro-Gomez (2007) describes as ‘hubris of zero point’. Vázquez (2014) draws from this theory, describing the centralised position as an epistemological zero point. It is described as such not only for the power to frame and enunciate discursive frames, such as the welcome-narrative, but actively reproducing the structures and rhetoric that rationalises itself, through western epistemology, thus seemingly being natural order. The zero point as inventing and defining the existence of ‘other’ only in relation to the centralised position of itself and in so doing reducing the welcomee to a passive role, as “helpless objects one is encouraged to protect and to whom one should be charitable” (Hage, 2000, p. 95) Advocacy for the welcome-narrative is thus not about reducing the power to enunciate; often it is unconsciously maintaining it. This is further exasperated by the notion that the welcome-narrative is an act of the liberal’s good intentions rather than a structural exercise of power. In denying this latter part the discourse retains false sense neutrality through individualised humanity, a false sense of positivity and detachment from contextual situation (Hage, 2000). It does not question who is framing the discursive frame, whose humanity is under question and thus must be verified, by whom? Who holds the privilege of inhabiting the epistemological zero point? Unwelcome Mats sought to highlight and challenge the epistemological zero point, humanitas, enunciator, inventor, classifier, or in other words welcomer. It did so by existing within non geo-spatial borders, through public intervention and through the refusal to look upon refugee as ‘other’ that must share personal story to be deemed worthy of welcome.

Geo- and body-politics of knowledge have been hidden from self-serving interests of western epistemology and that a task of decolonial thinking is the unveiling of epistemic silences, of western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued, and decolonial option to allow the silences to build arguments to confront those who take originality as the ultimate criterion for the final judgment

(Mignolo, 2009, p. 4).

8. A Different Conversation

“Other people, with their own existence and knowledge’s, do not have the same problem you have and therefore could care less about your knowledge until the moment that you impose it on them and you assume that you ‘know them because you describe them and include them in your system of knowledge and in your epistemic architecture”
(Mignolo, 2011, p. 192)

Challenging the discursive frames, calls into question the control of knowledge and power that requires delinking from colonial constructs through epistemic awakening in the creation of decolonial discourse. Decolonial options thus definitively reject the framing of the epistemologically privileged zero point, instead its sets itself the task of delinking through acts of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009). Unwelcome Mat, were a subversive intervention – only obtaining permission for its installation at the Immigration Museum to meet the Festival’s obligation to have one permanent public intervention available to the public. When ontologies are delinked from epistemology, worlds are created without authorisation, highlighting the colonial contradictions and multiplicity of being “a world in which there is room for many worlds”, as stated by the Zapatista movement and quoted by Sandoval (2000). Decolonial interventions, such as the Unwelcome Mats, are such because they begin the conversation from a different point. Unwelcome Mats instigates a different conversation by starting the conversion from an alternative bases. It starts the conversation earlier:

Instead of assuming universal ‘human nature as a starting point’, decolonial thinking start by assuming, first that since the European renaissance and particularly during and after enlightenment, humankind was divided between different types of humanity-knowledge makers and informants, enunciators and enunciated (Mignolo, 2011, p. 190).

Unwelcome Mats asked: who has the imperial power to welcome? What/how have the historical forces of colonialism designated such power? What is the relationship between welcomer-welcomee? What is this welcoming in relation to indigenous practice versus nation-state practices? Starting the conversation at this point rather than the subject positions, asks how relations came to be, in turn shifts discourse by challenging the terms of the conversation. This shift as an epistemic act of disobedience.

2. Conclusion

“Instead characters here carve new space for existing, one which was not there before”
(Guterman 2014, p. 59)

“To fully appreciate the politics of refugees, we must consider movement to be an ontological

activity' ...it is not only the refugee's body that is moving but also the sovereign state-the body politic- that is in constant motion"
(Nyers, 2006, p. x)

The welcome-narrative holds a monopoly over discourse relating to refugee, asylum seeker and ex-detainee advocacy. As a narrative it perpetuates an oppressive pattern that demands a dramaturgy for consumption, incorporation and assimilation into dominant colonial narratives. It frames the conversation, the terms of engagement, and the means of enunciation. It does not create a conversation, it demands a conversation. A conversation in accordance to the logic of colonialism. Unwelcome Mats was an attempt to interrupt the very premise of the welcome-narrative, problematizing its frame and holding it responsible to its humanistic, altruistic, neutral and universalistic claims. It sought to shift the geography of reason (Mignolo, 2009 p.14), highlight the historical manipulation which lead to subject positionality between welcomer and welcome. It sought to bring to light how we take for granted the assumptions, history and definitions within the welcome-narrative and how it silences the possibility of other types of conversation. Being placed at 'old colonial sites', it sought to link the contemporary regimes to their deliberate, violent formations throughout history. Colonialism not as event but as process and structure. The very same mechanism that maintains nation-state practices of exclusion/inclusion. Unwelcome Mats was an instigation from within the refugee community, thus also challenged dramaturgy of passive, traumatised and depoliticised victim as incapable of holding or understanding the nuanced complexities of contextual refugeeeness. Unwelcome Mats directly challenged that idea that to be included in the existing epistemic architecture is enough, demonstrating that decolonial interventions must instead seek to have a different type of conversation.

A different type of conversation requires discourses that boldly reconfigure the "binary logic of sovereignty" (Nyers, 2006, p. xiv). The limitation of the welcome-narrative, when applied uncritically, lies in the fact that it bases solutions within the very frameworks of the problem. They produce and reproduce an internal coloniality of self-legitimising power, within which nation-state is privileged as the only means to understand, frame and practice inclusion.

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